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ABSTRACT

Literacy education for non-English-speaking adults is taxing the fragile adult education system in the United States. Despite federal limitations, a million immigrants enter the country each year. In contrast with the past, the non-English-speaking need more education to compete in more sophisticated workplaces. The nation's largest cities are rapidly becoming bilingual, but because of the federal immigrant amnesty program, demand for English language instruction is also increasing substantially. Hispanics and Asians form the largest immigrant groups. Quality of instruction in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs is a matter of current concern. Volunteers account for a large proportion of ESL literacy teachers. Standards of instruction for immigrant amnesty programs are loose, and the dropout rate is high. Workplace language skills and literacy are greatly needed. Debate over the advantages and disadvantages of bilingual and multicultural education continues, but federal policymakers are focusing more on the need for effective ESL programs. Hispanic illiteracy and potential for inadequate education are high. Some literacy programs have been especially effective. The approaches used in the programs vary, including the use of native language skills to build English literacy, whole-language literacy development, parent involvement and literacy education, and job-related general education. A list of resource organizations is appended. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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MYTH # 13:

ENGLISH IS GOING OUT OF STYLE

Among adults considered functionally illiterate, those who do not speak English are a big chunk of the percentages. The non-English-speaking have taxed an already fragile adult education system in the past few years, representing all of the growth in federally supported programs and most expansion in urban community-based programs.

But will the enrollment surge peter out this fall? November is the deadline for meeting the requirements of the amnesty program.

Is the quality of the literacy training received by the non-English-speaking good enough to enable them to function in American society and especially in a competitive workplace?

What role does language--and lack of literacy--play in the very high dropout rate among Hispanic youth?

These questions are important because the literacy ability of those who speak another language at home and the continuing stream of immigrants arriving anew will be a persistent issue throughout society for a long time to come. The latest Census Bureau estimate of those residents who do not speak English well enough to function in society, based on a 1982 survey, is just over 10 million adults. That was before significant migration increases from Central America and Asia.

Despite the limitations placed by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, almost one million immigrants enter the country every year, only 650,000 of them legally. This assumes the high side of the estimate of undocumented workers--300,000; the low estimate is 100,000.

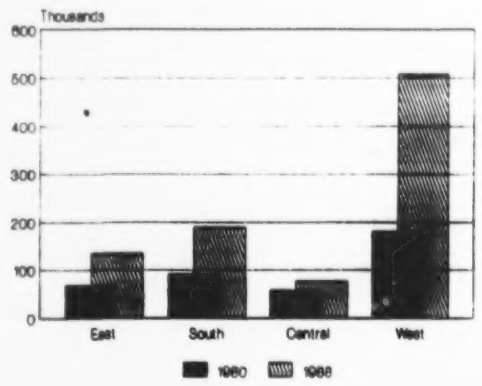
According to Jeffrey Passel of the Urban Institute, evidence of the immigration reform act's affect "is not strong, one way or the other." Some studies show a slight decrease in immigrants, others indicate little, if any, change in patterns.

Those entering illegally are not likely to seek formal education programs because of their reluctance to have anything to do with public authorities. The U.S. Supreme Court guaranteed a free public education for the children of illegal immigrants in 1983 (Plyer v. Doe). However, since the reforms took effect, the inability of undocumented immigrants to gain work forces them into very destitute situations and to move frequently, says Joan First, director of the Coalition of Advocates for Students. Consequently, she says, their children are not enrolled in any one school long enough to benefit.

This situation creates the language and cultural isolation feared by those who advocate "English only" as a policy. But in most other aspects of the immigration picture, new entrants to this country follow a positive course toward assimilation. They seek to learn English and learn it as rapidly as previous waves of immigrants.

Yet, comparisons with past performance are deceiving. When immigrants arrived here in great numbers before, they could be absorbed

Change in ESL Enrollment in Adult Education by Region, 1980 & 1988



Source: U.S. Dept. of Education

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into a semi-skilled and manufacturing economy that honored brawn more than literacy. Today, the non-English-speaking are caught in the same spiral as native speakers who do not have the educational background to compete in more sophisticated workplaces. They are trapped in low-skill, low-pay jobs where they do not receive training for advancement. Yesterday's literacy standards are not good enough.

What Do the Figures Say?

The nation's largest cities rapidly are becoming bilingual. According to Jodi Crandall, director of the national clearinghouse for Literacy Education for Limited-English-Proficient Adults, by the end of this decade, 53 of the largest metropolitan areas in the country will have a majority of populations whose native language is other than English.

The 1982 Census Bureau study estimated that 37% of adults with low literacy skills spoke a language other than English at home. Of these, 82% were born outside of the United States; 42% lived in neighborhoods where their native language prevailed; and only 14% were literate in their native language.

A 1990 report on federally funded adult education programs says that their enrollment of those with limited English proficiency jumped from 19% to 30% of the total between 1980 and 1988. About 3 million adults participate in federally funded programs--basic education, English-as-a-second-language, and adult secondary education (leading to a diploma). Almost one-half of the 2 million adults in basic education programs are limited-English-proficient. In nine states and Puerto Rico LEP students make up more than one-half of all enrollments--California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, and Utah.

The crunch on ESL programs undoubtedly was caused partially by the immigration law. Those applying for amnesty must demonstrate, by this November, "progress" on acquiring competence in basic English literacy. Those under age 16, over age 65, or over age 50 and a resident for at least 20 years are exempted from this requirement.

What Languages Are Talking?

In 1988 Hispanics represented 8.1% of the United States population, a 34% increase since 1980. About one-half of this growth is attributed to immigration. By the year 2000, Hispanic-speaking residents are expected to represent 11% of the total population. However, two states account for one-half of the Hispanics, California and Texas.

Among the Spanish-speaking, there are great differences. About one-half are of Spanish or Mexican origin (12 million); many are descendents of those who lived in the Southwest as early as the 1500s. Puerto Ricans, primarily settling in New York and New Jersey, number about 2.5 million. Of the 1 million Cubans, most were middle-class businesspeople fleeing the Castro regime. Another 125,000 "Mariel" boatpeople had a harder time assimilating than the first wave of Cubans. Central Americans and South Americans total 2.2 million, or 40% more than the early 1980s.

The Asian population, about 2% of the total now, is expected to double by the year 2010. Another 25% of the new immigrant group consists of a great diversity of "others"--Haitians, Afghans, Ethiopians and East Europeans. But Hispanics and Asians alone will comprise 18% of the population by the year 2030.

Since the immigration spurt began in the mid-1970s, the waves of immigration have followed previous patterns, even though they mostly came from areas of the globe other than the European roots of the past. The first immigrants were well-educated, upperclass families, followed by the military/merchant cohort. A third wave consists of farmers and others with skills less usable in today's economy, who often are illiterate in their own language. For example, the H'mong, from the Laotian mountains, did not have a written language until a few decades ago.

Are They Learning English?

The problems with quality in adult literacy programs especially haunt the ESL field. Most of the paid instructors are white, middle class teachers, moonlighting from their regular jobs in schools.

As the number of non-native speakers grew, so did the number of volunteers. In 1988, according to the U.S. Department of Education report, volunteers accounted for 40% of the teachers and 50% of the personnel altogether in adult education programs. Full-time personnel in the field decreased by one-half between 1980 and 1988--down to 6,000. Such volunteer and part-time help may not be

available when LEP adults need them. A large percentage of immigrants in the workforce hold night jobs in the service industry, so traditional evening classes do not benefit them.

Those who signed up for adult education because of the terms of amnesty are in a rather loose program, standards-wise. The federal government set no minimum requirements for English oral proficiency, only that those seeking permanent legalization must show evidence of progress in literacy, as well as in U.S. history and civics. Those who complete 40 hours of instruction in a 60-hour program approved by the Immigration and Naturalization Service can receive a "certificate of satisfactory pursuit." Teachers must be able to document attendance and student progress.

As the amnesty-eligible students collect the necessary hours, they tend to leave the programs. At the beginning of this year, education programs receiving grants under the amnesty law were reporting a big drop off in students after the 40-hour minimum, as much as 30-40%.

Those entering the country from Asia with refugee status may have had the advantage of language and cultural education at refugee centers before leaving for the United States, as many as 500 hours of classes.

"A serious effort to provide basic survival English and workplace-oriented language instruction to all limited English proficient adults would require an average of 600 hours per student," says William Bliss, a consultant on immigrant and refugee education. Author of a study on LEP programs for the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, he estimates the cost would be $1,500 per student, or $1.5 billion a year for all new immigrants.

Despite these problems, LEP adults are seeking out classes and sticking to them at a higher percentage than native-English speakers. According to the Department of Education study, 89% of the enrollees in ESL programs completed them in 1988; only 60% of adults in basic education classes (figures are not separate for ESL students in those classes) completed their courses.

Further, among Hispanics, at least, English eventually becomes as strong a language as Spanish. A study by Calvin Veltman, commissioned by the Hispanic Policy Development Project, found that 75% of Hispanic immigrants are speaking English on a regular daily basis by the time they have been in this country 15 years. Seven out of 10 children of Hispanic immigrants become English speakers, and their children use English as their mother tongue. Almost all Hispanic immigrants remain lifetime bilinguals, using different languages in different settings.

Language at the Workplace

The largest percentage of new adult immigrants are in their 20s and 30s, seeking work. Indeed, new immigrants tend to shun dependency on social services; only in education do their costs outweigh their contributions to the economy, according to a California-based study.

Contacts made by the Business Council for Effective Literacy indicate that "health, food, and other service industries already depend heavily on this population and are faced now with having to address their communications and basic skills needs." Immigrants, minorities and women are expected to fill 85% of the new jobs created by the year 2000. Between 1980 and 1987, for example, the number of Hispanic workers increased 43%, to 2.3 million. Training language and culturally different workers on the worksite looms as a major challenge to businesses.

A Minnesota study of employers found that the most worrisome problem with Indochinese workers was their inability to understand instructions and procedures--and an inclination to quit if humiliated by any criticism. Workers can learn routine skills by watching others, says a BCEL newsletter, but the major task of the modern workplace is to handle the non-routine, to be able to ask questions and communicate about problems to supervisors. Consequently, ESL adults need "pre-literacy skills"--speaking and listening--as a prerequisite for learning to read and write.

Another problem facing American business is training on the other side--of their own managers and executives. In testimony before Congress last fall, Larry Hirshhorn, senior research manager of the Wharton Center for Applied Research in Philadelphia, said the challenge of the 1990s will be to re-train the managerial level to share decisionmaking with workers who have very different language and cultural backgrounds.

What Determines Literacy?

For years the public schools have debated the role and extent of bilingual education. At

the adult level, the issues are similar and just as passionately argued.

Community-based education programs particularly defend the use of an adult's native language to gain proficiency in English. They point to their better success at keeping students in programs, although these organizations also tend to provide multiple services for enrollees, such as job counseling and placement, consumer information and other help to maneuver American culture.

Last February about 200 advocates of multilingual and multicultural adult education programs shared knowledge and concerns at an El Paso conference on literacy. The most successful programs reported at the meeting used the multicultural approach--as well as many aspects of "participatory" literacy programs. These included family-oriented programs, multi-services through the literacy program, use of native language, and an emphasis upon student-directed and student-written materials.

For these advocates, native language is a strength rather than a drawback. And an adult's cultural background is the key to gaining empowerment. Schools and too many workplace literacy programs teach "other people's meanings," according to Hanna Arlene Fingeret, director of Literacy South at Raleigh, N.C.

"If we are to work effectively together," she told the conference, "we must be clear that respect for cultural and linguistic background is not simply a matter of motivating, titillating, interesting, recruiting, or retaining. It has to do with dignity, power, strength, and authority. We cannot separate literacy from experience, from culture and traditions."

However compelling these arguments are, public policymakers--and funders--want proof of results. Thus, assessment has become a major issue for ESL programs. Two years ago Congress mandated the use of standardized tests to evaluate adult literacy programs, including those for ESL students. But learner-centered programs, as are most of those claimed to be successful with multilingual populations, are the antithesis of standardization.

One strategy is for learner's to set their own goals, with regular record-keeping on their progress computerized. Ron Solorzano of the Educational Testing Service recommends that a person's native language be used in assessments. This helps build proficiency in language generally and uses a person's strengths in literacy.

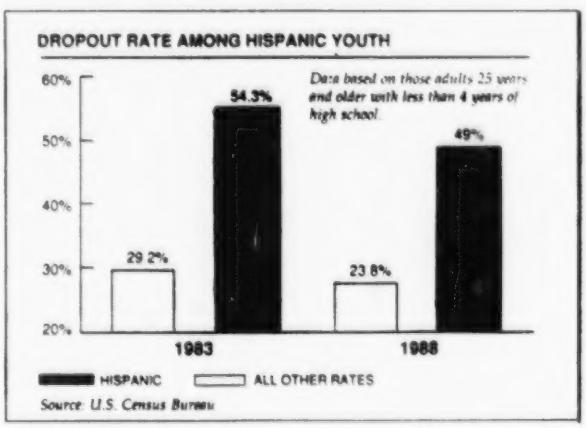
The Roots of Hispanic Illiteracy

Using federal census and education statistical data, SER, an Hispanic employment group, estimates that 200,000 Hispanics are added annually to the pool of functional illiterates. Of Hispanic adults 25 years and older, 49% have not completed high school, compared to 23.8% of non-Hispanics. Currently, the Hispanic school dropout rate is the highest of all minority groups, about 40%, compared to 17% for Blacks and 14% for whites.

"It is not the language barriers of the new immigrants that are cause for alarm," says Bliss, "but the lack of skills among youngsters who have emerged into adulthood on U.S. soil as strangers in their own land, lacking language skills and job-preparedness as though they had just arrived from another country."

Summarizing recent studies, the Council of Chief State School Officers said in a report earlier this year that too many children whose home language is not English get too little help. At least 25% of these children receive no extra educational services. Most programs for students are insufficient in English language instruction; few provide support in the native language.

According to the National Council of La Raza, undereducation which begins in elementary school and continues to graduate school leaves as much as 56% of Hispanics functionally illiterate. However, young Hispanics have a much better employment rate than the other leading minority group, young Blacks.



The number of families headed by single Hispanic women increased dramatically in the 1980s--from less than 20% in 1980 to more than 27% in 1988. According to La Raza, these Hispanic women are less likely than their Black or white counterparts to have completed high school (only 26%).

The mother's educational level is the single most important determinant of a child's academic progress. Thus, poorly educated Hispanic mothers contribute greatly to their children's likelihood of becoming poor students and dropping out of school.

Some Programs That Work

Literacy Education Action, developed by the El Paso Community College, is a model program that covers all the bases in a bilingual city. Approximately one-fifth of El Paso's population, or 100,000 people, are considered functionally illiterate because their dominant language is Spanish. The college's comprehensive program, launched five years ago, is based on using the native language to build literacy skills.

Among the projects they run:

- A Literacy Center at the downtown campus of the college that serves as the hub of community literacy group efforts, such as libraries, the Private Industry Council, and various tutoring programs.
- Training for volunteer tutors, who work one-on-one with students at 24 sites throughout the county.
- Small-group instruction, offering two-hour classes twice a week at all three campuses of the college.
- Live interactive televised literacy instruction at eight sites, including a community housing project, the public schools, local factories, community centers, a public library and the college's campuses.
- Pre-vocational classes at several sites, directed at single parents and/or homemakers wanting to enter training.
- Literacy instruction for parents of preschool and primary school children, using a curriculum that is being developed as a national model for bilingual families.
- Job training and workplace literacy programs in partnership with other agencies and with local businesses.

The college has been able to mount such a comprehensive program, according to its president, Robert Shepack, because it formed a broad range of partnerships and collaborations around literacy.

Another model approach is the Invergarry Learning Centre in Surrey, a working-class suburb of Vancouver, B.C. Its emphasis upon whole-language literacy development is used in many programs in the United States.

Any adult wanting help with reading or writing is given an assessment at the center and introduced to the various classes and reading materials. They are encouraged "to try them out" but not given directions about what to read. From the very first day, according to one description, the adult is viewed as a writer with something important to say.

The range of materials is wide, and each student receives a blank journal; if they are unable to write, they can dictate entries in the journals. The notebook becomes the student's text. Through well-researched strategies, the program develops literacy skills. Students' writings are published in a magazine, VOICES: New Writers for New Readers that includes work from many literacy programs.

Similarly, the Pajaro Valley school district near Watsonville, Calif., uses children's writing to encourage parents to come together, become involved in their children's education and become writers themselves. As many as 100 parents in this largely Hispanic rural community meet monthly to read their children's writing out loud, read books in Spanish, and discuss children's literature together.

With each turnover in employees costing the hotel industry about $1,500, employers are beginning to assess the impact of language difficulties on the turnover rate. Anne Lomperis, head of Language Training Designs for the Service World in Coral Gables, Fla., has developed a 10-week, on-site program that focuses on the language needs of employees in specific jobs. Not only does such training improve safety and services, but it helps reduce "stereotyping of guests by employees from a different culture," she says.

At the other extreme, the Continuing Education Institute in Boston emphasizes general literacy skills in the programs it conducts with contracts from local businesses. Students already know the job-specific language, say the program operators, but what they need are general education skills that lead non-native speakers to a goal, such as a high school diploma.

SER: Jobs for Progress, Inc., is a national Hispanic employment and training organization that uses Family Learning Centers as the core of its programs. Using a computer-based curriculum, SER claims that 100 hours of instruction advances a student an average of 2.7 grade levels in English skills and 2.4 grades in math skills. The centers also offer extensive counseling to their students.

SOURCES

National Clearinghouse/Literacy Education for Limited-English Proficient Adults
Center for Applied Linguistics
1118 22nd St., N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 429-92927

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages
1601 Cameron St., Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 836-0774

National Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Forum
220 I St., NE Suite 220
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 544-0004

Office of Vocational and Adult Education
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Hispanic Policy Development Project
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Invergarry Learning Center
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CATCH-UP ON LITERACY NEWS

• Both houses of Congress have endorsed expansion of adult literacy programs soundly, but House and Senate will have to agree on their proposals in a conference committee. The Senate passed a bill sponsored primarily by Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) with only one dissenting vote. The House version, sponsored by Rep. Tom Sawyer (D-Ohio), is included in an omnibus education bill which passed with fewer than 30 dissenting votes. Both versions agree on a national research center, increased funding for training, and increased support of adult literacy programs channeled through the states.

• The American Society of Newspaper Editors sponsored a one-day seminar on coverage of adult literacy issues at the Gannett Foundation Center in Rosslyn, Va., in July. The Education Writers Association assisted with the program. Also, the National Association of Broadcasters, with EWA help, has prepared a background piece on adult literacy issues. Literacy Beat readers will receive copies of both reports.

The Literacy Beat *is a publication of the Education Writers Association, produced under a grant from the MacArthur Foundation. Questions should be addressed to Lisa Walker or Anne Lewis at EWA, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 429-9680; Fax (202) 872-4050.*

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